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Realigning politics: electoral coalitions, political change, and the Republican party from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush

Robert Mason

Meeting with aides in October 1972, at the height of his campaign for reelection, Richard Nixon told them about how he conceptualized his coalition. “Our New American Majority,” noted chief of staff H. R. Haldeman, in summarizing the president’s remarks, “appeals across the board for the same reasons to all people; the basic American values: a strong United States, patriotism, moral and spiritual values, anti-permissiveness.” While Nixon aimed to displace the “FDR coalition” that had dominated US electoral politics for decades, he believed that “the material issues of taxes and prices” remained advantageous for his Democratic rival George McGovern: “If those were the issue the people would be for McGovern rather than for us.”¹ This was a conceptualization that Nixon saw as defying not only conventional wisdom (especially those who saw his coalition as a “bunch of haters”) but also pollsters’ advice. “Oh, sure, if you poll, they’ll say it’s taxes, or it’s prices and the rest,” he said. But Democrats always out-promised and thus outperformed Republicans on bread-and-butter issues, Nixon insisted, and so tackling such issues was not advantageous for his party. The GOP opportunity, by contrast, occupied political terrain that was, in his view, different—resting on the return of “square America” as a rebuff to what he called “the ‘Movement’” of the 1960s. In seeing his interpretation of that opportunity as defying expert opinion, Nixon grounded his analysis instead in personal insight, and he saw his time at

¹ H. R. Haldeman, diary entry, October 14, 1972, H. R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, CA [hereafter RNL]. Online at <<https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/haldeman-diaries/37-hrhd-audiocassette-ac25b-19721014-pa.pdf>>, last accessed November 30, 2017.

Duke Law School as crucial in equipping him with an understanding of the South, a key location for Republican growth.²

Much of the literature about electoral realignment has neglected detail about politicians' engagement with the opportunities and challenges that such periods of change and transition offered.³ Exploring that detail confirms that political actors reflected on this change, and that they sought to control and shape its political impact—to reposition their party appropriately in order to harness electoral advantage. This also highlights the historical significance of uncertainty and contingency. For a lengthy generation of Republican politicians—spanning several decades that started with the New Deal—the stakes involved in the pursuit of realignment were high. Their best efforts in devising strategies to challenge their Democratic rivals' electoral dominance, rooted in the coalition that Franklin Roosevelt had mobilized in support of New Deal liberalism during the Depression years, seemed powerless. Even when liberalism started to weaken and fracture, from the late 1960s onwards, the prize of majority status seemed out of reach; while some political scientists would argue that “dealignment” rather than realignment characterized post-1960s electoral trends, Republicans continued to work hard to reposition and to revitalize their party, even still in search of that prize.⁴

Richard Nixon, the “silent majority,” and the “new majority”

² Audio recording, October 14, 1972, conversation 15b, tape 798, White House Tapes Collection, RNL. Online at <<https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/forresearchers/find/tapes/tape798/798-015b.mp3>>, last accessed November 30, 2017. On polling, see Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, “The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (1995): 163–195.

³ Harold F. Bass, Jr., “Background to Debate: A Reader’s Guide and Bibliography,” in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 141–178; Theodore Rosenof, *Realignment: The Theory That Changed the Way We Think about American Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). Scholarly interest in presidents as party leader has been limited; an important exception is Daniel J. Galvin, *Presidential Party Building: Dwight D. Eisenhower to George W. Bush* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010). Among historical investigations, Sean J. Savage’s research offers a similar exception: *Roosevelt, the Party Leader, 1932–1945* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991); *Truman and the Democratic Party* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997); and *JFK, LBJ, and the Democratic Party* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

⁴ Robert Mason, *The Republican Party and American Politics from Hoover to Reagan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) explores the longer history of Republicans’ engagement with the problem of the party’s minority status.

Electoral politics absorbed Nixon to an extent unusual even among politicians. How to maximize the opportunities embedded in the Democratic party's travails of the late 1960s and early 1970s—as liberalism weakened and fractured—was a constant concern of his administration until the Watergate scandal (itself, of course, a product of obsession with electoral politics as well as the abuse of power) forced Nixon to concentrate on survival rather than the institutionalization of his “new majority.” To be sure, Nixon was president at an auspicious time for his party—an environment of political promise that was encapsulated perhaps most memorably by the title of Kevin Phillips's 1969 book about the opportunity that it was encountering, *The Emerging Republican Majority*.⁵ Talk of electoral realignment, journalist David S. Broder observed, was “almost a national sport.”⁶ No one was more engrossed in playing the game than Nixon, and his White House was a location of contestation not only about how best to mobilize this putative majority, but also about the reasons why some Democratic voters were disaffected and thus available for Republican cultivation. The pursuit of the majority therefore involved a debate. Perhaps the most famous contribution to this debate, *The Emerging Republican Majority* was a work about electoral and demographic trends, rather than the policy dimensions of realigning politics. It earned controversy for its assumption that inter-group animosities drove political conflict and thus electoral outcomes (during the 1968 campaign, when he was on the Nixon team, Kevin Phillips commented to journalist Garry Wills that his expertise was “the whole secret of politics—knowing who hates who”), and contemporaries tended to connect its thesis with a “southern strategy” that saw Republican opportunity in white opposition to civil rights.⁷ But when discussing policy, Phillips spoke more broadly of excessive liberalism within the Democratic party as alienating key strands of its coalition, while also noting that the economic conservatism traditionally promoted by the Republican party catered to an elite and was not well attuned to this

⁵ Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969).

⁶ David S. Broder, *The Party's Over: The Failure of Politics in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 192.

⁷ Garry Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 265.

opportunity for realignment. “I wish we could drop into the Potomac all those obsolescent conservatives who are still preoccupied with Alger Hiss and General MacArthur, and who keep trotting out *laissez faire* economics and other dead horses,” Phillips said in one interview. “They make the Republican party look musty to millions of ignored working-class people who are looking for a party that relates to their needs.”⁸

Within this debate there was little disagreement that disaffected Democrats were likely to be found among whites in the South and in “middle America”—a construct that attracted so much contemporary attention that *Time* magazine named the “middle Americans” as 1970’s “man and woman of the year.”⁹ Still, this represented the more straightforward strand of Nixon’s electoral puzzle. At the end of the 1960s and at the start of the 1970s, so much tumult afflicted American politics and society that there were very many reasons for disaffection within the Democrats’ coalition; in 1968, Nixon reached out to “the forgotten Americans,” but he did so with a largely anti-incumbent emphasis that provided little guidance for an approach to government. The nation’s involvement in the Vietnam War and questions of civil rights divided Americans, and sapped the strength of the Democrats’ coalition, with particular sharpness, but the economy was starting to deteriorate, too, while the “counterculture” posed fundamental challenges to mainstream values.

If in October 1972 Nixon presented his response to electoral opportunity as surefooted and grounded in political instinct as well as insight, his engagement with the debate was actually rather more open-minded, and uncertain, in nature.¹⁰ Sometimes he stressed cultural conservatism in response to the liberalizing trends of the 1960s; sometimes he saw value in repositioning the

⁸ James Boyd, “Nixon’s Southern Strategy: ‘It’s All In the Charts,’” *New York Times* magazine, May 17, 1970, 106. See also “‘The Emerging Republican Majority’: An Interview with Author Kevin Phillips,” *Human Events*, August 16, 1969, 8–9, 14.

⁹ “Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans,” *Time*, January 5, 1970, 10–17.

¹⁰ A piece that stresses “Nixon’s initially conflicted stance” with regard to how to build a new majority is Paul Frymer and John David Skrentny, “Coalition-Building and the Politics of Electoral Capture During the Nixon Administration: African Americans, Labor, Latinos,” *Studies in American Political Development* 12 (1998): 131–161 (quotation, 132).

GOP as a more reform-minded party; sometimes he looked to his record on foreign policy in developing a case for reelection. During his first year in office, various interventions in the public debate about political change encouraged Nixon to seek answers in the White House, rather than to impose answers. When, for example, journalist Pete Hamill wrote about “the revolt of the white lower middle class” for *New York* magazine in the spring of 1969, the president circulated the article to aides, seeking comment.¹¹ Their responses varied, though also mirroring Hamill in somehow combining racial resentments and economic insecurities to explain this discontent.¹² Some months later, a *Newsweek* article on a similar theme—that of the “troubled American”—encouraged Nixon to note that the administration’s outreach to those he had labeled “forgotten Americans” during his 1968 campaign was “a weakness,” observing that “We keep talking to the minorities (urged on by the establishment) and overlook our greatest potential.”¹³ That fall, Nixon made a television appeal to the “silent majority” for support of his gradualist policy on Vietnam, intended to undercut the growing power of antiwar sentiment; the success of the address (with a Republican National Committee poll of early 1970 suggesting that 73 percent of voters identified as members of the group that it described) left Nixon intrigued about ways to broaden and consolidate, for electoral purposes, the enthusiasm of the silent majority.¹⁴ While the response to the speech gave Nixon a hint of a potentially powerful coalition of support, how to make a “new majority” on the basis of this “silent majority” remained not immediately clear to him.¹⁵ Although Nixon’s thinking while he was president rarely strayed from electoral matters (and domestic policy aide John Ehrlichman, in a rather embittered memoir, wrote that Nixon spent probably “half his working time on the nonsubstantive aspects of the Presidency”), it was of course in

¹¹ Pete Hamill, “The Revolt of the White Lower Middle Class,” *New York*, April 14, 1969, 24–29.

¹² Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 46.

¹³ Memo, Ken Cole to Harry Dent, October 6, 1969, box 8, White House Special Files—Staff Member and Office Files: Harry S. Dent, RNL.

¹⁴ Memo, John R. Brown III to Harry Dent *et al.*, February 10, 1970, box 8, White House Special Files—Staff Member and Office Files: Dent.

¹⁵ Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, 63–65.

preparation for campaigns—the midterms of 1970 as well as his reelection bid of 1972—that Nixon finally needed to make choices among the different interpretations of the right strategic direction to take.¹⁶

The most forensic analysis of the “troubled Americans” was the work of a policymaker, not a strategist—Jerome M. Rosow, Under Secretary of Labor. Rosow identified them as neither affluent nor poor, occupying instead an economic middle ground that exposed them to frustrations of inadequate career opportunity and income growth. While many saw opposition to progress on civil rights as fomenting discontent among whites who had traditionally supported the Democratic party, Rosow saw new workplace competition, the result of desegregation, as a sensitive issue, but he also believed that actually shared concerns existed among non-affluent whites and blacks. Such insights led Rosow to advocate a package of wide-ranging reform, designed to tackle workplace ills—probably rather too bold and extensive even for a Republican administration prepared to countenance policy innovation.¹⁷ Offering an interpretation that stood in contrast with Rosow’s analysis, a “Middle America Committee” of White House aides convened for while; sharing Rosow’s belief that domestic reform was needed to tackle economic discontents in lukewarm manner at best, their ideas for Middle America’s cultivation reflected their own conservatism.¹⁸ Their analysis also reflected the widespread view that cultural and social concerns were significant in explaining discontent within the Democrats’ coalition. Such a

¹⁶ John Ehrlichman, *Witness to Power: The Nixon Years* (New York: Pocket Books, 1982), 239.

¹⁷ Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, 72–74, 97–98.

¹⁸ Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 128; memo, Tom Charles Huston to “the Middle America Group,” January 20, 1971, and memo, Harry Dent to John Brown, January 21, 1971, both in box 3, White House Special Files: Staff Member and Office Files: Patrick J. Buchanan. In her groundbreaking study of the Nixon administration, which played up the innovative and reform-minded aspects of its domestic policy, Joan Hoff emphasized the significance of the aides who caught Nixon’s attention in explaining its policymaking direction. Joan Hoff, *Nixon Reconsidered* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). As his October 1972 discussion with aides about campaign strategy suggests, Nixon believed that he knew enough about politics to rely on his own instincts and insights in this area—even if the history of his engagement with the “silent majority,” the “real majority,” and the “new majority” suggests that his approach was actually somewhat less surefooted. Here, too, there were opportunities for aides and advisers to exert influence; over time, Nixon chose and relied on aides (perhaps notably exemplified by Charles W. Colson) who played up the divisive tactics of confrontation with Democratic opponents as the route to electoral success, rather than a “new American revolution” thesis that preferred moderation.

view found public expression most prominently in *The Real Majority*, a key contribution to the contemporary debate about realigning politics, published in the summer of 1970 and written by Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenberg, Democrats who wished to warn their party of the dangers of identification with social liberalism.¹⁹ Members of the “real majority,” according to Scammon and Wattenberg, were conservative on the “Social Issue” but remained liberal on the “Economic Issue”—a point encouraging them to note that Republicans needed to “move on the bread-and-butter issues” in order to maximize their electoral opportunity. Scammon and Wattenberg explained, “A Republican Party perceived of as go-slow on the problems of unemployment or the cities or transportation or pollution or against Medicare or Social Security will be vulnerable.”²⁰ The goal of *The Real Majority* to act as a warning to Democrats about social liberalism’s dangers, in order to maintain their electoral vitality, offers a reminder that by no means all contemporaries saw their moment as involving a transition from New Deal liberalism to conservatism, from Democrats to Republicans; indeed, Fred Dutton’s *Changing Sources of Power* argued that the arrival at the polls of the baby-boom generation promised to push American politics in a more radical direction.²¹

Although Nixon’s project to build a new majority was forward-looking, there are mismatches between its concerns and key aspects of the conservative revitalization that took hold as the 1970s progressed. While Nixon’s strategy to win over disaffected Democrats possessed a gendered dimension, involving, for example, an appeal to (disproportionately male) labor unions, Nixon does not seem to have anticipated the significance of antifeminism as a conservative cause.²² Instead, the GOP packaged itself as the “Party of the Open Door” that reasserted its

¹⁹ Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970).

²⁰ Scammon and Wattenberg, *Real Majority*, 292.

²¹ Frederick G. Dutton, *Changing Sources of Power: American Politics in the 1970s* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

²² Writing in mid-1970, Rogers C. B. Morton, chair of the Republican National Committee, regretted the “losing battle on the subject of the recognition of women in this Administration,” worrying about Republican inattention to the Equal Rights Amendment, though principally dwelling on the need for “more

traditional claim to feminist support.²³ Furthermore, whereas Nixon's interest in a coalition rooted partly in "moral and spiritual values" was in harmony with his outreach to Rev. Billy Graham as a conduit to Protestant communities, his focus on religiously related constituencies rested chiefly on Catholic Americans who had been an important strand of the Roosevelt coalition. For Nixon, abortion was largely an issue of special concern to Catholics. Nixon's cultivation of Catholic voters while maintaining the Republicans' traditional support among Catholics foreshadowed the emergence of a distinction between the religious and the nonreligious within the parties' coalitions, but his stress remained on winning Catholic support rather than the construction of a voting base characterized by religiosity. The flourishing of the "religious right" was a phenomenon of the future.²⁴ The same was true of the economic "malaise" that would fuel tax revolts and confidence in "supply-side" economics, even if the foundations of sustained post-World War II already were starting to subside. As his discussion with aides about the "New American Majority" reveals, Nixon believed that "prices" and "taxes" were losing issues for Republicans; he then mentioned then welfare as an exception in perhaps possessing some advantage for the party, but only because McGovern's proposal for a guaranteed annual income represented a policy overreach that alienated many who traditionally supported the Democratic party, in Nixon's view. In hindsight, the creation of a vision for the revitalization of the Republican party at this time of realigning promise seems to have been straightforward, but the electoral consequences of social trends and political developments were not so clear to discern even for a president and administration unusually engaged in analyzing them.

visibility for women in the Administration." Memo, Rogers Morton to Harry S. Dent, June 5, 1970, box 9, White House Special Files—Staff Member and Office Files: Dent.

²³ Catherine Rymph, "The Republican Party and the Problem of Diversity, 1968–1975," in Robert Mason and Iwan Morgan, eds., *Seeking a New Majority: The Republican Party and American Politics, 1960–1980* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2013), 76–89.

²⁴ Daniel K. Williams, "Richard Nixon's Religious Right: Catholics, Evangelicals, and the Creation of an Antisecular Alliance," in Laura Jane Gifford and Daniel K. Williams, eds., *The Right Side of the Sixties: Reexamining Conservatism's Decade of Transformation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 141–158.

Although the realignment project ostensibly sought to revitalize the Republican party, tensions between president and party complicated the pursuit of this project. When the project's results fell short of its ambitions, in doing little to boost the numbers of the Republican contingent on Capitol Hill or of Republican identifiers within the electorate, Nixon was swift to attach blame to Republican politicians, rather than any shortcomings of his vision. Nixon's strategy for the 1970 midterms pursued party gains especially in the Senate, as well as larger success in defining the Republicans as the party of social conservatism and, perhaps yet more so, their Democratic opponents as the party of social liberalism. Yet in many cases even those Democratic candidates with a record of what Nixon branded as "radical liberalism" on cultural concerns proved deftly adept in evading such charges. In Illinois, for example, Adlai Stevenson III, seeking election to the Senate, faced attack from Vice President Spiro Agnew for speaking of "storm troopers in blue" in reference to some Chicago police officers' response to demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. This formed part of a broader Republican offensive against Stevenson for his liberalism; Ralph Tyler Smith, the incumbent seeking reelection, commented, "When I see Adlai, I see red." When Stevenson, like other Democrats, stressed anti-crime credentials, Agnew spoke of "flip-flopping" and labeled him "Adlai-come-lately on the issue of law and order."²⁵ But neither the initial charges of radical liberalism nor the subsequent allegations of political insincerity seemed to build electoral appeal for the Republican party. Smith lost to Stevenson, and while the outcome nationally for the GOP was actually a respectable showing for the in-party (limited losses in the House, a few gains in the Senate), this marked a disappointment for Nixon—who had been planning for a realignment. Nixon's initial impulse was

²⁵ John R. Coyne, Jr., *The Impudent Snobs: Agnew vs. the Intellectual Establishment* (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1972), 140, 360–365, 409–413 (quotations, 363, 410, 411); R. W. Apple Jr., "Sen. Smith's Ad Barrage Seems Failure in Illinois," *New York Times*, October 25, 1970, 76; E. W. Kenworthy, "Stevenson Defeats Smith For Illinois Senate Seat," *New York Times*, November 4, 1970, 34.

to bemoan the quality of Republican candidates (“so poor,” he said), although post-election analysis by aides largely pinpointed the campaign’s shrillness as problematic.²⁶

A few months later, Nixon seemed to have learned that lesson (even if his fondness for political hyperbole remained untouched) when his 1971 State of the Union address unveiled a “New American Revolution” of programmatic innovation, involving “six great goals” that ranged from welfare reform to a healthcare initiative. “We’ve been out of office more often than not in the past forty-odd years, and we’re more comfortable when we are negative—when we are against something,” Nixon told congressional Republicans. “Now we can be the party of change. We can be the party of imagination, of innovation.”²⁷ This vision, connecting a new direction in policymaking with electoral opportunity, did not, however, succeed in mobilizing GOP enthusiasms, while the president himself allowed his attention to stray back to his key concerns of foreign policy—which he labeled the pursuit of a “generation of peace.” Nixon’s agenda achieved success of a rather limited nature, certainly not substantial enough to identify the party with domestic reform, rather as Nixon’s comments of October 1972 suggested, in noting that bread-and-butter issues remained advantageous for the Democrats.

While the 1970 midterms represented an episode of unusual engagement by the White House in party-building, this party moment was supplanted in 1972 by a strategy that straightforwardly focused on presidential reelection and downplayed partisanship, frustratingly for many Republicans. Nixon’s efforts to mobilize “square America” relied on the close identification of his opponent, George McGovern, with “the ‘Movement.’” Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Senate minority leader, called McGovern the “the triple-A” candidate—of acid, amnesty (for those who had avoided the Vietnam draft), and abortion.²⁸ The campaign, then, really relied more on anti-McGovern attacks than a pro-Republican argument; when Nixon had

²⁶ Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, 110–113 (quotation, 111).

²⁷ Noel Koch and Raymond Price, “Congressional Breakfast,” January 27, 1971, box 84, White House Special Files: President’s Office Files, RNL.

²⁸ Warren Weaver Jr., “Mitchell Calls No. 2 Post ‘Open,’” *New York Times*, May 26, 1972, 42.

spoken about Republican comfort with negativity, it was an observation that said much about his own approach to fighting elections. This was perhaps a promising approach for a minority party seeking with difficulty to challenge the power of a majority's party electoral coalition; in 1972, it assisted Nixon in achieving a personal landslide, but it led to little progress toward the larger mobilization of a pro-Republican "new majority."

If Nixon failed to align faithfully the goals of his realignment project with the party at large, nor did he achieve much harmony with extra-party movements that promoted conservatism. The successful campaign to capture the presidential nomination for Barry Goldwater in 1964 had demonstrated vividly the new political power of conservatism. This power, in Nixon's eyes, was an obstacle rather than an aid to his quest for a new majority, because he saw the lesson of 1964 not as an indicator of conservatism's grassroots as well as elite-level vitality, but rather as the electoral non-viability of conservative principle in contest with New Deal liberalism. To be sure, voices of conservatism had a significant place in his White House—notably that of aide Patrick J. Buchanan, one of the first to be hired by Nixon when an aspiring candidate, to counterbalance his law firm colleague Leonard Garment, a liberal Democrat. Although Buchanan worked hard at the White House not only to maintain good relations with the conservative community but also to promote an interpretation of political change that stressed the need for conservative policymaking, the Nixon record largely remained one that disappointed that community.²⁹

The difficulties that the Nixon administration encountered in maintaining good relations with the conservative community were demonstrated vividly by the dissent of the "Manhattan Twelve." This was a group of leaders from the conservative movement whose alienation with Nixon—especially on matters of foreign policy and defense—caused them in early 1972 to

²⁹ The trajectory that Nixon started to design for his second term seemed clearly more conservative than that of his first, though the arrival of the Watergate scandal quickly absorbed administration attention so much that it confounded the pursuit of that trajectory. At least in terms of economic policy, the change is perhaps related as much to the rise of monetarist theories, as to any philosophical reinterpretation by Nixon. Allen J. Matusow, *Nixon's Economy: Booms, Busts, Dollars, and Votes* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

support the challenge of Representative John Ashbrook of Ohio to Nixon's renomination. Nixon saw his China policy as possessing spectacular electoral value, carefully choreographing his visit to maximize its impact back home, and then harnessing the achievement as a key claim for reelection in the fall of 1972. For many movement conservatives, by contrast, it was a sign of inadequate toughness against the communist threat. Disappointed with Nixon's failure to respond to his realignment opportunity in a wholeheartedly conservative way, and seeing the lack of improvement in party fortunes more generally as clear proof of its strategic shortcomings, in 1975 William A. Rusher, publisher of *National Review*, would call for the creation of an "Independence Party" to unite economic conservatives and cultural conservatives (ideally led by a ticket of Ronald Reagan and George C. Wallace) in his book *The Making of the New Majority Party*.³⁰

Ronald Reagan, the revitalization of the Republican party, and the "gender gap"

The politician at the focus of Rusher's aspirations for electoral change to mobilize conservative support did not share the conclusion that a new party was necessary to pursue that ambition. Ronald Reagan—soon to confirm the power of his grassroots support when in 1976 he almost took the Republican presidential nomination from the White House incumbent Gerald Ford—shrugged off such talk at the 1975 Conservative Political Action Conference, asking, "Is it a third party we need or is it a new and revitalized second party raising a banner of no pale pastels, but bold colors which make it unmistakably clear where we stand on all the issues troubling the people?"³¹ When in 1980 he won the White House, and confidence in a Republican realignment returned, Reagan's engagement with that prospect largely avoided the tensions that had characterized Nixon's relationship with the party and with extra-party conservatives. (Even if members of the religious right often experienced disappointment that the administration did not tackle their agenda much, Reagan proved to be unusually skilled in maintaining conservative

³⁰ William A. Rusher, *The Making of the New Majority Party* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1975).

³¹ "1975 Conservative Political Action Conference Highlights," *Human Events*, March 1, 1975, 13.

unity in largely enthusiastic support of his leadership.) Still, Reagan, too, faced obstacles in his pursuit of realignment politics. In 1982, optimism that, following the party's 1980 capture of the Senate and the administration's success in marshaling its economic package to enactment in 1981, the midterms could boost the Republicans' House contingent proved misplaced—probably because of the economic downturn that critics labeled the “Reagan recession.”³² In 1985, “Operation Open Door,” a project to harness benefits for the party of Reagan's reelection success, in seeking to convert “Reagan Democrats” into Republicans, had little success.³³

If the 1980 elections produced an outcome that fostered new speculation of realignment, another electoral phenomenon emerged then that caught most contemporaries by surprise but that proved to possess long-lasting significance—the modern “gender gap.” This gender gap probably formed part of Republican success, and of Democratic failure, because it involved a pro-Republican surge among men, but understandably against a context of GOP association with antifeminism, initially most saw the gender gap as manifestation of a rejection among many women of the party, conservatism, and Reagan.³⁴ Richard Wirthlin, pollster for the administration, suspected that the gender gap would prove to be a transient feature of electoral politics, but he also believed that it was multidimensional, involving concerns spanning economic policy and foreign policy.³⁵ Still, the administration's engagement with this problem seemed halting and hesitant, with uncertainty both about its origins and about its implications for policymaking and electoral strategy. Nevertheless, it was also sometimes thoughtful; Elizabeth Dole, who tackled these issues because of her responsibility for outside liaison at the start of the Reagan years, recognized that the changing role of women, in the aftermath of second-wave

³² Gary C. Jacobson and Samuel Kernell, “Strategy and Choice in the 1982 Congressional Elections,” *PS* 15 (1982): 423–430; Alan I. Abramowitz, “National Issues, Strategic Politicians, and Voting Behavior in the 1980 and 1982 Congressional Elections,” *American Journal of Political Science* 28 (1984): 710–721.

³³ Mason, *Republican Party*, 268.

³⁴ Marisa Chappell, “Reagan's ‘Gender Gap’ Strategy and the Limitations of Free-Market Feminism,” *Journal of Policy History* 24 (2012): 115–134.

³⁵ Richard B. Wirthlin to Edwin Meese III, July 15, 1982, box 45, Elizabeth H. Dole Files, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, CA [hereafter RRL].

feminism, had great implications, observing that “the real gender gap” involved “the shortfall between society’s promise of sexual equality and the often frustrating facts of American life” (even if her prescriptions for political action were more modest).³⁶

During the 1980s some popular as well as academic analysis of the gender gap was moving to stress the voting behavior of men rather than women as in flux, while the administration’s focus retained its original emphasis—especially within the framework of a White House Coordinating Council on Women—involving the area of party disadvantage.³⁷ Nevertheless, the prescriptions for action to tackle the problem underwent change when Dole moved to the Department of Transportation in 1983. Her successor at the Office of Public Liaison, Faith Ryan Whittlesey, took a somewhat different—more limited—view of the gender gap’s implications, dwelling not so much on the larger challenges posed to the party by social change, and instead on problems of political communication. Indeed, the administration’s response to the gender gap largely involved rhetoric and symbols, such as a pronounced uptick in the number of female appointments as the 1984 elections approached.³⁸ Probably the GOP’s anti-government commitments anyway obstructed the development of an agenda that equally appealed to women—likelier to believe in the need for government to provide socioeconomic security—as to men. While the gender gap would prove to be far from transient in nature, the ways in which its size and impact have changed over time are suggestive of the significance of politicians’ engagement with these issues.

³⁶ Elizabeth Hanford Dole, “The Real Gender Gap,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 29, 1982, 23; memo, Elizabeth H. Dole to Ronald Reagan, November 13, 1982, box 77, Elizabeth H. Dole Files, RRL.

³⁷ For an example of a piece of popular analysis, see Michael Barone, “What Do Men Want?” *Washington Post*, October 29, 1982, A29; for an example of academic analysis, see Louis Bolce, “The Role of Gender in Recent Presidential Elections: Reagan and the Reverse Gender Gap,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 15 (1985): 372–385. “The real question,” Barone wrote, “is why are men different?” Yet the focus of analysis within the administration seemed still to be the distinctiveness of women, as suggested by a briefing by Richard Wirthlin for the White House Coordinating Council in fall 1982. Memo, Elizabeth H. Dole to Richard B. Wirthlin, November 4, 1982, box 77, Dole Files.

³⁸ Memo, Faith Ryan Whittlesey to James A. Baker III and Michael Deaver, box 6, series I, James A. Baker III Files, RRL; Kira Sanbonmatsu, *Democrats, Republicans, and the Politics of Women’s Place* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 137; Janet M. Martin, “An Examination of Executive Branch Appointments in the Reagan Administration by Background and Gender,” *Western Political Quarterly* 44 (1991), 178–180.

Newt Gingrich and the “Republican revolution”

When progress for the Republican party at large remained somewhat glacial in nature during the Reagan years, the noisy frustration of Representative Newt Gingrich of Georgia led first, in 1983, to the creation with other congressional Republicans of the Conservative Opportunity Society (COS), and then to his takeover of GOPAC, founded in 1979 to raise funds in support of work toward majority status for the party. On his arrival on Capitol Hill in the late 1970s, Gingrich had been disappointed to discover a lack of engagement among his Republican colleagues with the goal of majority status. It carried more advantage for a congressional Republican, he observed, to work effectively as a minority legislator than to invest effort in pursuit of that challenging target; furthermore, Republicans were too often negative and uncreative in responding to liberalism, Gingrich concluded. Such analysis informed the realignment ambition that helped to guide his work through to the Republican success in the 1994 midterms, in opposition to the Clinton administration and in support of the “Contract with America.” Although Gingrich stressed the need for Republicans to articulate alternatives to liberalism more positively, he also believed that it was important to underscore inter-party difference, willingly embracing a confrontational approach to politics in doing so. This interest in synthesizing positivity and confrontation as a strategy for realignment was not straightforward to implement. In launching attacks on the Democratic leadership in Congress, Gingrich and COS tended to attract a reputation for the latter much more than the former.

Overreach—fostered by a misinterpretation of mandate that neglected to notice the significance of disaffection with the Clinton administration fueling the midterm victories of 1994, alongside any enthusiasm for the Contract—complicated efforts to consolidate that breakthrough. So too did the political savvy of Bill Clinton’s “triangulation” that largely confounded conservative attacks on him as excessively liberal. In unveiling the Contract, Gingrich had noted that internal polls gave each item at least 60-percent support, but an appetite for reduced taxation

and smaller government did not eradicate support for popular programs.³⁹ Working through COS, Gingrich and his colleagues had originally focused on attacking the long-dominant Democrats over procedural and ethical issues; when the fight turned to tax-and-spend issues during the 104th Congress, leading to shutdown of the federal government, the Republican momentum ebbed away.⁴⁰ The conflict that developed between the White House and Capitol Hill cemented congressional Republicans' association with the politics of confrontation, which did not assist the GOP in harnessing the 1994 breakthrough to achieve larger party gains. Four years after that breakthrough, the Democrats achieved a small net gain of seats—the first occasion since 1822 that a president's party increased its congressional representation in second-term midterms.

The George W. Bush administration and “rolling realignment”

Probably no Republican aide since Kevin Phillips was more absorbed by the detail of electoral history, and by the prospect of realignment, than Karl Rove, and Rove was much closer to George W. Bush than Phillips had been to Nixon. Moreover, if recent history had suggested that parties possessed declining importance in American politics, the Bush administration defied such history to take determined steps that were designed to strengthen the Republican party nationally.⁴¹ Claiming that a “rolling realignment,” favoring the Republicans, was in progress (even if, writing in 2002, John Judis and Ruy Teixeira mirrored Kevin Phillips in forecasting an “emerging Democratic majority”), Rove advocated a wide-ranging agenda to match targeted constituency groups with policy developments of special concern to them.⁴² Behind initiatives on education,

³⁹ Kenneth J. Cooper, “GOP Offers a ‘Contract’ To Revive Reagan Years,” *Washington Post*, September 28, 1994, A4.

⁴⁰ Thomas F. Schaller, *The Stronghold: How Republicans Captured Congress But Surrendered the White House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 73–169; Steven M. Gillon, *The Pact: Bill Clinton, Newt Gingrich, and the Rivalry That Defined a Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142–143, 154, 191–192.

⁴¹ Sidney M. Milkis and Jesse H. Rhodes, “George W. Bush, the Republican Party, and the ‘New’ American Party System,” *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (2007): 464–488.

⁴² Fred Barnes, “Realignment, Now More than Ever,” *Weekly Standard*, November 22, 2004, 11, 12; John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002). Of the Rove project to achieve a realignment, political scientist David Mayhew commented in 2007, “It’s hard to think of any analogue in American history to what Karl Rove was trying to do.” Joshua Green, “The Rove Presidency,” *The Atlantic*, September 2007, 56.

Medicare, and immigration law, and policies supportive of religious organizations' charitable activities, among others, stood an interest in outreach to particular constituencies—to consolidate existing support or to build new support. The agenda scored some successes, but post-9/11 foreign policy would shape interpretations of the Bush administration much more consequentially than the odyssey toward “compassionate conservatism” (a tag that strategically distanced Bush from the thirst for confrontation and the reputation for harshness often associated with Gingrich). Given the shortcomings of the Rove strategy's policy dimension, it is unsurprising that when reviewing his administration's electoral record, Bush stressed instead another strand, the use of new forms of information technology-based political organization: the “micro-targeting, and a very intense focus on getting out votes,” which, Bush noted, Barack Obama's campaign of 2008 further improved and thus quickly neutralized that emerging Republican advantage, through newly groundbreaking use of the Internet.⁴³ This conclusion offered a reminder that, even if it is challenging for a president, as party leader, to mobilize the party in support of a common agenda and strategy, the opposition party is also sure to work hard to frustrate party- and coalition-building efforts.

Shortly after Bush's reelection victory of 2004, perhaps the zenith of Republican self-confidence of those years, Rove revealed the influence in practical politics of scholarly ideas about realignment when he noted that “there are no permanent majorities in American politics.” Rove explained, “They last for about 20 or 30 or 40 or, in the case of the Roosevelt coalition, 50 or 60 years and then they disappear.”⁴⁴ At a similar moment during the Reagan years, when GOP optimism was probably still higher, Richard Wirthlin made an altogether more modest claim—one more in line with evolutions in academic understandings of electoral coalitions and the party system—when he spoke of the party's success not in unlocking the durable support of a majority

⁴³ Kimberley Strassel, “Bush on His Record,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 20, 2008, A13.

⁴⁴ Transcript, *Meet the Press*, NBC News, November 7, 2004 (via Factiva).

but instead in becoming a “parity party” alongside the Democrats.⁴⁵ Such comments were altogether more modest than the bullishness of the Nixon administration’s realignment talk, but reflected a pollster’s more realistic reflections on the likely dimensions of GOP gains under Reagan. The parallel with the New Deal realignment that occurred under Franklin D. Roosevelt was probably an exceptional example in American history of electoral change—rather than the archetype, an understanding that much of the realignment scholarship fostered.

Republicans and realignment

A keenly contested debate about contemporary electoral trends surrounded the development of Nixon’s strategy to mobilize a “new majority,” but the implementation of the strategy proved no more straightforward to achieve. Although among his goals was his party’s revitalization, Nixon found that the party system obstructed rather than facilitated such work—or, at least, he saw many of his fellow Republicans as failing to pursue faithfully the concerns that animated the project, whether this involved the attacks of the 1970 midterms on Democrats as social liberals, or a wholehearted embrace of the 1971 rhetoric about a “new American revolution” of programmatic reform. (As the conservative dissent Nixon encountered suggests, however, many Republicans saw the president as an inadequate custodian of the party’s principles, and they also viewed his reelection strategy of 1972 as selfishly focused on the White House, to the detriment of congressional contests.) Nixon’s disappointment with the Republican party encouraged him to contemplate the rather bold aim of launching a new Conservative party, in place of the Republican party. While he believed that such a label was more likely to win support among southern Democrats, he saw the Republican tag more generally as unappetizing for many voters.⁴⁶ As Nixon observed to aides, he was not the first GOP president to engage in such contemplation, due to similar frustration with the Republican party as a vehicle for electoral change; as president,

⁴⁵ Lou Cannon, “GOP Seeks to Extend Reagan Coattails to Hill,” *Washington Post*, September 15, 1984, A10.

⁴⁶ Raymond H. Geselbracht, oral history interview with H. R. Haldeman, April 13, 1988, RNL, 89–90. Online at <<https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/histories/haldeman-1988-04-13.pdf>>, last accessed December 13, 2017.

wrestling with the problem of the party's minority status, Dwight Eisenhower had raised similar ideas.⁴⁷ Similar frustrations with the Republican party as a vehicle for electoral transformation drove both to look for shortcut methods to consolidate and extend support among disaffected voters within the Democratic party coalition.⁴⁸ Nixon's successors as leading Republicans, too, developed plans for party growth that were usually thoughtful responses to political opportunity, but that also encountered problems. While the problems were sometimes reflective of those plans' shortcomings, they revealed, too, the difficulties involved in discerning trends in society and politics and then in developing an appropriate vision for electoral transformation. From the White House, the prospect of party growth was a significant and promising goal, but such frustrations, as well as the larger history of Republican engagement with the Republican goal, show that how to pursue that goal was far from clear and far from straightforward. To recover the perspectives and actions of politicians helps us to understand better the complexities and challenges that they encountered.

⁴⁷ H. R. Haldeman, diary entry, January 17, 1972, Haldeman Diaries Collection. Online at <<https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/haldeman-diaries/37-hrhd-audiocassette-ac18a-19720117-pa.pdf>>, last accessed December 13, 2017. Both Eisenhower and Nixon also contemplated jettisoning their vice president in favor of a Democrat for their second term—in Eisenhower's case, Senator Frank Lausche of Ohio (as a replacement for Nixon himself), and in Nixon's case, John Connally, the former governor of Texas. Steven T. Wagner, *Eisenhower Republicanism: Pursuing the Middle Way* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 119; Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority*, 162.

⁴⁸ These frustrations perhaps revealed an impatience for the party at large to mobilize a coalition similar to that of the president, as well as the strength of a New Deal-era paradigm that assumed the existence of a majority party that durably dominated the party system; even if data on party identification did not suggest that Republicans achieved such a position of dominance, breakthroughs finally took place at the Senate level in 1980 and then in both houses of Congress in 1994. Everett Carl Ladd, "Like Waiting for Godot: The Uselessness of 'Realignment' for Understanding Change in Contemporary American Politics," in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 24–36; Byron E. Shafer, "The Notion of an Electoral Order: The Structure of Electoral Politics at the Accession of George Bush," in Byron E. Shafer, ed., *The End of Realignment? Interpreting American Electoral Eras* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 37–84.

